

A Good Luck Haibane

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Category: Haibane Renmei

Genre: Drama

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2006-10-10 22:23:33

Updated: 2006-10-10 22:23:33

Packaged: 2016-04-26 12:45:37

Rating: T

Chapters: 3

Words: 15,697

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: At a Passing of the Year festival, Rakka meets someone who had upset her in the past. A story about a townspeople who discovers more about the haibane than she'd wanted to know. many end of series spoilers, InProgress

1. The Passing of the Year

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>Rakka looked at the festivities around her and smiled, cherishing a brief moment of relative peace. The young feathers had split up, each going with one of the senior haibane, leaving her alone with the twins - Kochi and Seifuu, a boy and girl who looked related and were roughly the age Kuu had been - and the newest feather in Old Home, Ukimi. She was older than the twins, almost the age Rakka had been when she was born. This would be the first Passing of the Year festival for all three of them and Rakka wanted to make sure it was special.<p>The twins were boisterous, and had spent very little time this evening standing still. The group had found an area of the town where stalls operating games and challenges were set up, and for the past hour they had been tossing hoops, shooting corks, squirting water, fishing for goldfish and many other fun distractions. Kochi sometimes wouldn't leave a game until he'd won something, and Seifuu wouldn't leave until she had bettered her brother - which led to a spiral of competition. <p>

Rakka was starting to run out of pages in her notebook, from paying each of these stallholders for countless games. And she'd only got this new one last week!

But it was good to see each of them having so much fun, and it was

wonderful to see them getting along so closely. The two of them had a tendency to fight like cats and dogs - she still remembered with horror the incident in the temple - but she'd always known they truly loved each other, from the moment they grabbed for each other's hands as their wings broke through their skin. And she, in turn, had grown extremely fond of them.

Ukimi, on the other hand...

It wasn't that Rakka didn't like, or didn't care for Ukimi. But she was an oddity, and she acted like it. She hadn't been born at Old Home - apparently Kana had found her in the town itself and had been the only Haibane there to help when her wings had emerged. By the time Rakka had found out Ukimi even existed she had been winged, named, and transferred to Old Home by the Haibane Renmei. That had been about a month ago.

Consequently, while it was now Rakka's job to look after new feathers, she had difficulty bonding with Ukimi in the same way that she had bonded with Reki, or with Kochi and Seifuu, especially since Ukimi seemed rather distant around everyone but Kana. Right now she was hanging back from the games, only joining in when Seifuu dragged her in.

The twins had found a stall where you threw bean bags to knock over cans, and Rakka paid for a few games each for them and stepped back, watching them from a distance. She really relished the festival this year - last year she had been worried about Reki's Day of Flight, and really hadn't been able to enjoy herself. This year, even though she had new responsibilities, her heart was far lighter and completely open to the celebration of a thoroughly happy year.

She walked over to Ukimi, and smiled at her.

"Are you enjoying yourself?"

Ukimi looked up at her, and nodded. "Yes..." she replied, her breath creating a temporary mist. "The lights are so pretty..."

"They are." Rakka agreed, looking around at the decorations. "The townspeople really put a lot of effort into the festival. Wait until you get to the square and see the clock tower." Kana had been boasting about how they had put special effort into decorating the tower this year, and Rakka had seen it in the daylight. She was looking forward to seeing it lit up.

Ukimi seemed to feel the same way, as her face glowed at the suggestion. That was something Rakka had noticed about Ukimi - more than any of the haibane of Old Home, she really loved this town. Every shop and house, every street and alley. Her heart lifted in a way that didn't show at Old Home, and she was always looking around for a new place to explore.

Or maybe, as Rakka often suspected, she was looking for someone.

Even now, she could see Ukimi was searching the crowd, slightly anxiously. The younger girl looked up at her and asked "How long is it until we give out the bell nuts?"

"In the last few hours of the old year," Rakka replied, "about half an hour from now."

Ukimi nodded nervously. "I hope I can find her by then."

Rakka was about to ask about this when Seifuu ran up behind her. "Rakka, look what I won!" With that she held up a small stuffed doll, and Rakka immediately had to fight to suppress a laugh.

The doll was obviously a haibane. A girl wearing a long blue jacket with a short brown skirt, and her hair was straight, black, and tied up into two pigtails. It was a Midori doll, and a tag attached to its leg said it was a "Good Luck Haibane."

Unable to fight it any more, Rakka broke into a grin. It was funny. The doll was adorable in a way that Midori, well... wasn't. And Rakka liked Midori, but had never considered her to be good luck. But still, her own experiences told her that's what many in the town considered them to be...

Suddenly she froze. If there were Midori dolls, then...

Rakka ran to the stall to inspect the other prizes. The shouting started thirty seconds later.

* * *

>It only stopped when Ukimi pointed out that they didn't have long now until it was time to hand out bell nuts. Coming to her senses, Rakka gave a few cutting parting words to the stall owner and they both threatened to report each other to the Renmei.<p>The group headed for the square, Rakka striding ahead with Ukimi just behind her, and the twins taking up the rear. They were in awe.<p>

"Wow, Rakka!" Seifuu said. "You were AWESOME!"

"Yeah!" Kochi agreed. "The way you threw that ball..." he mimed the action, and added "POW!"

"It's a shame she hit the back of the man's head though." Seifuu told her brother. "With a throw like that she could won her own doll."

Rakka cringed. She had the feeling she was going to regret that, but she'd got caught up in the moment.

Eventually the exchange of bell nuts began, and Rakka was quite surprised when she was almost immediately handed nearly a dozen red nuts, most of the young feathers competing to get her to take theirs first. She herself gave red nuts to the dorm mother, the man in the clothes store, the pharmacist and Hyouko. Midori got a green and she gave Rakka a white, and they embraced. (Midori was also given the doll, and only joked about it) Finally, Rakka exchanged brown nuts with Hikari.

While she was doing this, the others were all handing out their own bell nuts, and with her own ones delivered Rakka went looking for the kids, as they had wandered away from her. She quickly found Ukimi standing in the street, looking quite distraught.

"Ukimi? Is something wrong?"

"Rakka!" The new feather turned to face her, and Rakka thought she saw tears forming in Ukimi's eyes. "I... I found the friend I wanted to give a red nut to... but I've lost it! I'm sure I had three, one for you, one for Kana, and one for her, but it's not here and, and..."

She was starting to panic. Rakka stood in front of her and put her hands on Ukimi's shoulders.

"It's ok, it's ok... here." She reached into the pocket of her coat, and pulled out a red nut. "I was going to give this to someone, but... well, I guess I didn't think it through. He's not the type who would turn up here, and he probably wouldn't accept it anyway. And I can't give it to him after tonight. So..." she held out the nut, "here, give this to your friend."

The girl's face brightened immediately and she took the nut, carefully clasping it her hands. "Rakka... thank you! I'll... I'll be back in a moment!"

With that Ukimi ran off, and Rakka followed at a short distance. She wanted to see who this friend was, and watched as Ukimi rounded on a pretty young woman with short brown hair and handed her the nut. The woman looked surprised but delighted.

Then the woman looked in Rakka's direction and her face fell, like a weight of shame and guilt had settled on her. She looked away for a moment, before apparently steeling herself and approaching Rakka.

Rakka just stood there, quite confused, as a woman she'd never met before bowed her head and held out a bell nut.

Some moments passed while Rakka tried to make sense of this, and then she reached out and accepted the nut. After all, this tradition was just as much for the giver as it was for the receiver, a chance to say something when you couldn't find the words.

The young woman seemed to relax a little at this and looked up, a thankful expression on her face. And with that she walked away.

Ukimi drew up beside Rakka and looked at the nut. "It's brown. What does that mean again?"

"It means 'I'm sorry,'" Rakka answered. But why?

* * *

>It was a puzzle that bothered Rakka while the haibane gathered to watch the walls sing, and when it was finished, she asked the other senior haibane to take the children home. She was going back to Glie.<p>Traditionally the people of Glie gathered separately to witness the wall's performance. If Rakka looked over at the Abandoned Factory, she could see haibane perched on the rooftops. The Haibane of Old Home seemed to prefer to gather on a hill halfway between the town and Old Home. As for the townspeople, Rakka had heard that they would gather at the large plaza by the massive gate the Toga used to

leave and enter the town, where they had a close-up view of the wall. If she was going to find this mystery woman, she'd need to start there.<p>

There were still plenty of townspeople at the square when she arrived, but no sign of the woman. So Rakka started asking around, searching for a woman named Kaori (Ukimi said that was her name) and eventually heard that'd she'd been spotted heading west, as her house was on the western side of the town.

As she ran up the cobbled streets, Rakka couldn't help feeling a little put out. What kind of person apologises without letting their victim find out what they did? It was like putting a splint on a healthy arm.

Then, after about ten minutes of looking, she glanced down a side street and saw her quarry. Rakka took to a jog, quickly catching up with the woman and running into her path.

"Okay..." Rakka said, holding up the brown nut, "I have to thank you for the nut, but really, I thought about it and I can't accept it..."

"You, you can't?" The woman interrupted, her high pitched voice sounding irritatingly familiar to Rakka.

"YET." Rakka finished. "I can't accept it yet. I'm sorry, but... well, this is awkward and probably silly and I'm very sorry about it but I don't recognise you at all! I don't know what I'm forgiving."

"Oh." The woman's eyes widened, and then she nodded ruefully. "I guess I was arrogant to think you'd remember me. I was behind you almost the whole time." She paced around a little. "Maybe this will jog your memory."

With that she clapped her hands to her cheeks and opened her eyes wide. "Oh WOW," she practically squealed, "it's a cute little haibane! She looks a ****very**** unhappy, and it's ****extremely**** rude, but I think I'll go play with her halo!" And then she mimed poking a halo on top of her old head. "Ding!"

Rakka just stared at the pantomime, and the woman sagged and folded her arms.

"God, I was such an idiot."

"Wait... that was you in the clothes shop, that time? When I ran out?"

The woman nodded to answer, and Rakka found herself giving a little laugh, which annoyed the woman.

"Why are you laughing?"

"I'm sorry," Rakka replied. "I'm just relieved. I was afraid it was going to be something difficult. Of course I can forgive you for that!" She closed her hand around the nut. "There was a lot going on in my life at the time... I was very upset about a lot of things. You just... tipped the scales. But that's all gone now. Apology

accepted."

A smile crept onto the woman's face, and she breathed out. "That's a relief. Even when you took the nut the first time, I was still worried. I guess bell nuts can't do everything that words can."

"No. They can be useful though."

There was a brief awkward moment, and Rakka eventually broke it.

"I do wonder though... why now? It's been over a year, and I had almost forgotten about it."

"Ah," the woman said. "That's a longer story."

2. In a Locked Room

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* * *

>A few months earlier...<p><p>

Kaori had a haibane keyring. The ring itself was shaped to look like a halo, and a fine silver chain attached it to the head of a wooden model of a haibane - a girl in a pure white gown with pure white wings. Her arms and wings were tucked in around her and her face was a picture of perfect contentment.

She clasped it in her hands and whispered a quick prayer for good luck to god, then carefully stowed it in her handbag and strode into the library. Once inside she steered clear of the musty shelves and headed directly for the service desk, only to find there was nothing there except for a huge stack of unlabeled books. A bit sloppy and annoying, she thought, as she hated being forced to wait, but then she remembered they only had one librarian right now. The poor dear had probably been rushed off her feet for months!

Well, that was why she was here, wasn't it? To help bring the library back up to speed! When she'd seen that they'd needed a new junior librarian she'd come in for an interview which had went very well, and in the time since then she'd come up with lots of great ideas for this place. Now all she needed was word that she'd got the job... and that had been slow in coming.

To pass the time she picked up a small book from the counter, and started flicking through it in order to show interest. It was handwritten, and seemed to be about the beginning of the world. She hadn't got far into it when she heard three sets of footsteps approaching, and saw the Director of the library emerge from behind a bookcase, followed by a pair of women. One was the librarian who had been on duty when she had her appointment, a young woman with curling dark hair. The other was a taller, heavier woman with short brown hair who Kaori did not recognize.

"Now," the director was saying, "over the past few weeks the collection has suffered, a lot of books have been misfiled and the pile of books brought by the Toga has been building up..." The young librarian opened her mouth, but the director continued. "No need to apologize, Hisami. As I've already said, it was inevitable with us short staffed. Now, I know Sumika wasn't here when you joined us, but I'd like you to follow her lead. She has a lot of experience..."

Kaori ignored the conversation and pretended to read her book, waiting for a chance to talk to him. After what seemed like an eternity of waiting the two librarians went to work and he headed for his office, where the waiting Kaori took her chance and intercepted him.

"Excuse me, Sir..." she said, sweetly. "I don't know if you remember, but I was in for an interview a week ago, and I was wondering if you'd made a decision yet."

"Ah, yes..." he looked her over, as if trying to place her, and continued. "I remember. I'm sorry, but the position has been filled."

"What?" She almost yelled back at him "But... when I came in, you said I was at the top of the list..."

"Yes, well... I apologize for saying that so prematurely. A previous employee applied at the last moment you see, and we could really use experienced help right now. So you see, the position is closed..."

"But... that's not fair!" Kaori yelled, throwing the small book down on the service desk. This was intolerable... he'd almost promised her! "I needed this job; you said I could have it!"

The director did not respond immediately. Instead he just stared at the desk, watching the spot where the bouncing book had slipped off the other side of it. In the silence, the taller librarian stooped to pick the book up - if looks could maim, hers would have ensured Kaori never walked again.

The director drew himself up to his full height. "Please remember this is a library, Miss. Shouting is not allowed in here. And," he added, "I would hope that someone who claimed her 'life's calling' was to work in a library would have a greater respect for books. Especially... rare ones like that. Good day, Miss."

With that he pushed past her and into his office. Kaori stood there for a moment, fuming, and then stormed out of the library, taking care to kick over a stack of books on the way.

* * *

>That, Kaori thought as she grumped along the street, had been completely unfair. An obvious show of favoritism. Or maybe it was just bad luck again. <p>Not her fault, in other words.<p>

"It's their loss," she reasoned. The place had been a mess, frankly, and it was obvious why with such rude people running it. In fact, she remembered that there had been a haibane working there not long ago -

she must have left because her co-workers weren't nice to her, cared about stupid rare books more than they cared about her, in which case they got what they deserved. If you had a haibane to bless you and give you good luck, you'd have to be nuts to let them get away.

She stopped in the street and sighed. She sure could use some of those blessings right now. For what seemed like the whole of the last year, nothing had gone right.

She'd broken up with her fianc  Kenji nine months ago, shortly after the beginning of the year. She'd got fed up of him being so critical of her, and all the fun had drained out of their relationship over the final couple of months. There had been others since, of course, but nothing lasting. They all seemed to get scared off by something.

She was pretty sure that the "something" was her money troubles - not long ago she's lived in her big house on the edge of town, with her cook, butler, three maids and the gardener. Now she was alone in the big house. Her inheritance had started to run out and the staff had been the first to go, though sometimes one would check back to see if she was eating correctly. Most of the furnishings and ornaments had been sold now, and she had reluctantly moved into the servant's quarters on the bottom floor. To make matters worse, since she'd started going broke many of her friends had stopped talking to her for some reason, leaving her increasingly alone without the promise of parties to keep her occupied.

So it was that she was searching for her first job at the age of twenty-three. This was not as easy as she'd expected. She liked fashion, and had tried the tailors, but they hadn't been interested in someone who couldn't sew. She couldn't type quickly enough for secretary work, got far too bored by clerical work, was too easily angered for shop work and would rather die than set foot in a factory. Everything else involved animals, kids or heavy lifting. What she really wanted was a job where she could sit around all day, do some reading and get paid for it. Librarian had seemed perfect, so it really was bad luck that she hadn't got that one.

She drew the haibane keyring out of her handbag. Sometimes, she envied them. Everyone knew they were always busy, yet always smiling. They didn't seem to have any trouble finding jobs, and always seemed to be among friends. They didn't even need money - they just gave a note when they needed something, and the Haibane Renmei paid for them!

It was no wonder they gave good luck and blessings to the people of this town - with the charmed lives they led, they were probably some of the luckiest things in the world. Well, except for the Grumpy Haibane she'd once met in the thrift shop, but she was probably a special case. Sometimes Kaori wondered about her, and her own run of misfortune... it would be just her luck to meet the only Bad Luck Haibane in Glie, who handed out curses instead of blessings.

At that point, as if to underline this thought, a drop of rain fell on her head.

"Ohhh no..." she groaned, and ran for her home as a downpour began.

* * *

>Leyton House was an ancient stone manor - maybe one of the oldest surviving buildings in Glie - and had been in her family for generations. It was three stories tall, with an attic and a basement, and the grounds were expansive. The hilltop it sat on was called the Lookout - the highest point within the city, and the most expensive land in Glie. Once, some time ago, the nobles had planned to build their houses as tall as possible there so they could sneak peeks over the wall. It hadn't worked - even at five stories the wall was just too tall - but the land had retained its value after hope had been lost. <p>A few people had suggested all of Kaori's money problems could be solved if she just sold the house, but she didn't want to depart from the place of her birth just yet.<p>

Gravel flew from her shoes as she sprinted down the front path in the pouring rain and practically dived onto the porch, taking a moment to rake in her handbag for the keys and stare balefully at the flowerbeds. Damn... she'd really wanted to do some work on them today. She did like tending the gardens, but could only manage to keep up with some of the beds lining the path. The other beds were covered in weeds now, including a blight of dandelions that appeared every spring and always threatened to overwhelm the entire garden.

Sighing, she turned she turned the key in the door and stepped inside. The state of the interiors was not much better than the exteriors. Over the past year they had grown dark and bare, and Kaori wasn't much of a cleaner - the floor was dirty in many places, and a layer of dust and cobwebs had gathered over anything she didn't use regularly. To make matters worse she was drenched to the skin and dripping water everywhere.

"Right. Bath," she said and hurried upstairs to spend the next few hours reading a book in the bathtub, grateful for the fact that she'd kept up with the electricity bills and had a near-limitless supply of hot water.

* * *

>She remained there for most of the afternoon, running more hot water as required, and only got out when she realized she was getting hungry. Of course, she'd never learned to cook, but snacks were well within her abilities. She'd just eat out later like she normally did. <p>She changed into fresh clothes and stepped out into the first floor hallway, only to be surprised when an unexpected smell met her. This part of the house was unused now apart from the bathroom and had mostly got still and stale, but this strange scent was sweet and fresh, like a ripe berry...<p>

Curious, she followed her nose and was led in the opposite direction from the kitchens, toward the front of the house. When she reached the end of the hallway she found the smell led her round to the right, which was a dead end apart from the door to her father's study.

Except it's not now, she thought. Dead people don't own rooms. And apart from his old writing desk, that room should be empty. But even though she knew the room was empty, there was no doubting that was where the smell came from. It intensified as she approached the door,

and as she came within a few paces of it she felt her slippers go squish, squish on the carpet.

"Huh?" She squatted down and touched the carpet. It was damp, and it looked like some liquid had seeped under the door. "This must be what's making the smell."

She tried the door handle, now even more curious than before. It was locked. But of course it was... she'd locked it herself after the furniture was sold. But as she tried the handle again she was surprised to hear a startled yell from inside the room, and the sound of someone moving around and... crying?

"Who's in there?" she called though the door. There was no reply, just another yelp. "Who's there?" Kaori asked again, her temper rising. "There's nothing to steal and nothing worth vandalizing."

No response this time, just silence. Kaori rattled the doorknob again and then walked away to get the key when it refused to open.

The crying had got quieter and yet more desperate when she returned, and she found herself hesitating as she turned the key, wondering what she would find in there. Probably a burglar or a kid talked into breaking in to the old house for a bet. Still, she couldn't shake a slight feeling of dread. As a child, coming to this room had usually meant she was in trouble, about to buckle under her father's oppressive glare. Those days were long gone, but...

She sighed and steeled herself, swung the door open, and saw something she would never have guessed would be there.

A huge blue-gray shell or cocoon dominated the far wall of the room. It looked like it had grown out of the floorboards - vines and roots had worked their way into any gap they could find, and the carpet was torn and rolled up. The cocoon was broken as well - parts of it were lying around the room, and she could see a small pool of liquid sitting in its base.

She took a few steps into the room, hearing her shoes squelch on the waterlogged carpet, and then the sound of muffled crying got her attention again. It was coming from the corner of the room, from the gap between the wall and the writing desk. From a girl there, huddled up and shivering, who almost certainly wasn't a burglar. Most burglars didn't turn up looking like they'd slept at the bottom of a river for a start - her long, dark hair was matted and tangled and hung down over her face, and all she wore was a rough white nightgown.

Surprised, Kaori took a few steps closer and knelt down in front of the girl. She was terrified, and had definitely been crying. She looked back at Kaori, staring warily at her, and shuffled further back against the wall.

"Hey, it's okay..." Kaori said, trying to appear calm, but inside she was full of questions. Where'd this cocoon come from? Where'd this girl come from? The cocoon? That was nuts... she'd NEVER heard of anything like that before.

"It's okay..." she repeated, "You're not in trouble. I'm not going to hurt you." She held out a hand. "What's your name?"

The girl squirmed and hugged herself more tightly, squeezing her eyes closed and turning her face away. She didn't reply.

"I'm Kaori..." she continued, stretching her hand out further. "What's your name?"

"I don't know..." the girl replied through a sob, her voice cracking. "I... I can't remember."

"You've forgotten your name?" This sounded bad...

"I can't remember anything..." was the answer, and Kaori reeled. "I don't remember... I don't remember my home, and I don't remember my dad or my mom... it's all gone, and all I know is it should be there." The last few words were a whine, as she let out another sob. "And knowing that... I should know but don't... it hurts..."

"You really don't remember anything?" Kaori asked, a little horrified. "Do you know how you got in here?"

"No! I... I just woke up in here, and the door was locked, and the windows are too dirty to see out of, and... and..." There was a sniff and a sob, and before Kaori knew it the girl was on her feet and throwing her arms around her, crying into her shoulder.

"... I was afraid I was going to be alone forever!"

She sat there, a little stunned, as this distraught (and slightly sticky) girl hugged her.

"What's wrong with me?" the girl asked. "Where'd I come from? Why can't I remember?"

Kaori hesitated for a moment, and then put her arms around the child.

"I don't know. But I promise, we'll find out."

* * *

>They stayed that way for a while, and then Kaori asked the girl if she was hungry. <p>As it turned out, she really was. When Kaori made her a sandwich, she wolfed it down like she hadn't seen an ounce of food in days. More followed, and the girl ate them so quickly Kaori had to get her to slow down, or she might start throwing it up. Soon they were sitting at the big wooden table in the kitchen as the girl ate, and she was chewing more carefully now. Kaori sat watching her, wondering what she could do to discover her identity, but she didn't have a clue where to start.<p>

"Are you sure you can't remember anything?" she eventually asked.

The girl stopped eating. For a second Kaori was afraid she might start crying again and regretted her question, but instead she just let her shoulders sag.

"No, nothing real. But... I had a dream," she replied nervously, looking awkward about it.

"A dream?" This was interesting. "What was it about? It might help."

"I don't know... it was..." She took a few deep breaths, and tried to steady herself. "In the dream, there was this huge, still ocean. Only water, for as far as I could see in every direction. And I was floating on it. I could lie on it, or kneel, or sit up without sinking, but if I tried to stand I'd lose my balance and fall down. And I was the only person there... nothing else, anywhere. Well... except for the sun and the moon, which were moving much faster than they should - I just lay there and watched them until I fell asleep."

The girl finished, and Kaori felt a strange shiver go down her spine.

"Does it mean anything to you?" the girl asked, but she had to shake her head.

"No. There aren't any oceans in Glie. I've only seen them in books." The rest seemed pretty meaningless to Kaori as well. It didn't answer the big questions, like how this girl got in a cocoon in a locked room.

"Maybe I should take you to the Watch," Kaori wondered to herself.

"Kaori..." the girl said, squirming in her chair.

"If anyone would know about missing girls, they might..."

"Kaori..."

"What?" she asked, turning to face the girl.

"My back... it's been really sore for a while now," she winced mid-sentence, "and it's getting worse. It's..." she let out a sharp gasp, "it's getting a lot worse."

The woman just looked at her carefully, and walked behind her chair. "I'll just open up the back of your gown, and take a look." The girl did not protest, so she started to carefully undo the buttons, trying not to brush her fingers against her back as it made the girl shudder and wince. And what she saw surprised her.

Two large red bulges were swelling painfully from behind the poor girl's shoulders.

"Oh boy..." Kaori said to herself. "You're just one mystery after another, aren't you..."

* * *

>An hour later, she was really, really worried. <p>The pain the girl was going through had only intensified, as the swelling on her back got worse and worse. Soon she'd been unable to sit or stand for the pain and Kaori had moved her through to her own bedroom. Now she lay face down on Kaori's bed, squirming and moaning. Her breathing was

labored and gasping and she had begun sweating heavily.<p>

And all Kaori could do was pace around, trying to figure out what to do. She didn't have the first clue where to begin! She was less of a nurse than she was a cook, and as a cook she burned everything she touched! She didn't dare even touch the girl now.

"Kaori..." the girl choked out, tears forming in her eyes again. "Help me... it's so... I feel like I'm falling apart!"

Kaori dithered, biting her thumbnail. She had to do something. She'd decided to go find a doctor long ago, but she couldn't bear to leave the girl for long. Who knew what could happen while she was gone? But she could always go get someone else to find a doctor. She ran over to the bedside and knelt by it. The girl's hand was hanging over the side of the bed and she took it.

"It's OK... it's going to be all right," she said, and the girl nodded. "But I need to go find someone, and then that someone will go find a doctor for you..."

"NO!" the girl howled, "No! Don't go, don't leave me! Please, don't go!"

"I have to!"

"No!"

"I have to!" Kaori said, clasping the girl's hand with both hands. "I promise I will be back. I'll be back right away! Okay?" She smiled desperately, trying to get the girl to trust her on this, and was relieved when she nodded.

"Good girl. Remember... I'll just be a moment."

And she ran for the door, her heart thumping its way up into her throat.

* * *

>She was out the front door and off the porch when she noticed it was still raining heavily, the dark clouds lending the sky a malign tint even though it couldn't be any later than four or five o'clock. With no time to go find her coat she sprinted down the front path and out into the street beyond. <p>Which was completely empty.<p>

She cursed the rain for forcing everyone to stay inside, and looked around, wondering which way to go. As she was doing so she heard the mechanical grunt and hum of a scooter and turned to see a headlight coming up the hill.

Perfect! Someone on a scooter could make it to the doctor's even faster! She started jumping up and down in the street, shouting "Hey! Heyyy!" and was relieved as the scooter slowed and came to a stop just past her. She ran up behind the rider, who was wearing a black raincoat that obscured all other features, and stood to the side of the scooter so she could see their face - it was a teenage girl, with short dark hair. Nobody she knew though.

"What is it?" the rider asked, slightly annoyed by the

interruption.

"Sorry, but I need your help!" Kaori yelled frantically. "I need you to go find a doctor, there's a very sick girl in that house!"

"Sick? I'm on a delivery, but sure, I'll go find him. What's wrong with her?"

"Lots of stuff!" She started waving her hands, making exaggerated gestures as she explained. "She just, TURNS UP in one of my upper rooms, and she has total amnesia, and now there are these huge bumps on her back that seem to be trying to kill her! I've never seen anything like it before, and... and..."

She trailed off. The scooter rider was staring at her.

"Why are you staring?"

"Bumps on her back? You're joking... you've got to be joking. That's not funny!"

"Joking? I wish! It's true!"

The two stared each other down, and the scooter rider eventually bowed her head and swore. She then jumped off the scooter and dragged it onto the pavement before starting a sprint for the house.

"Hey!" Kaori called after her. "You were supposed to go get the doctor!"

The rider turned around and continued jogging backwards.

"If this is what I think it is, we don't have time! And a doctor won't be any help anyway!" she grimly yelled back, and as she turned to run for the house the wind caught the hood of her raincoat and blew it back.

Even in the rainstorm, there was an obvious flash of gold above her head, and Kaori's heart lifted immediately. A haibane! Maybe, just maybe, some good luck at last? She ran after the haibane and caught up with her in the vestibule. She was fighting to quickly get out of her raincoat, and Kaori was delighted to catch a glimpse of white wings... and slightly less delighted to see slightly manly clothes.

Okay, she's a tomboy haibane, she thought. She's probably still lucky.

"Where is she?" the haibane demanded, and Kaori quickly led her though to the bedroom. The two of them stood in the doorway, watching the sick girl - she didn't seem to be aware they were there, and her breathing had grown even more desperate and painful. After a moment watching this, the haibane pulled Kaori back into the hallway.

"How did you find her? How long has she been here?"

"I, I..." Kaori stammered as she tried to think about how to say it. "I know it sounds crazy, but I found her in a locked room. There was this cocoon, and water everywhere, I guess she came out of it..." The haibane grimaced, and looked back into the bedroom, obvious concern

on her face. "You know what this is, don't you? What's wrong with her?"

"Technically, there's nothing wrong with her. This is supposed to happen to her." Kaori stared in disbelief as the haibane continued. "This happens to every haibane."

"This happens to haibane?" This was impossible to believe. Surely haibane wouldn't be put through this kind of pain. "But, she's not a haibane."

The haibane looked at Kaori. "Isn't she? How can you tell?" she asked, a little sharply.

"Well... she's not got a halo. And she's not got wings..."

"She'll have wings soon, lady. What do you think those lumps are? Her wings are growing under her skin!"

Kaori had difficulty digesting this. It sounded wrong... "Are they meant to?"

"Yes! And..." the haibane lent in closer to whisper to her, "If she thinks she's in pain now, she's in for a shock when they break through."

All Kaori could do was goggle at her in horror. This did NOT fit her mental picture of haibane.

"What can we do?" she asked, weakly. "If she's not sick... can we help her?"

"Yeah," the haibane replied. "But it depends on one thing. Can you stand the sight of blood?"

3. Worse Than I Expected

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* * *

>Kaori took a moment to respond, unsure of what to say. Then the decision was made for her, as the girl let out a breathless shriek and grabbed their attention.<p><p>

"Kaooooiiiiii! Kaori... where are you?"

Forgetting about the haibane's question, she rushed to the side of the bed and clasped the girl's hand in both of her hands.

"It's okay, I'm here!" The girl did not respond, but the relief on her face was obvious. "It's okay, everything's going to be fine. I found someone who can help you!" With that she motioned to the haibane, who rushed over and knelt by Kaori. "This is my friend... um..." she began, and then froze. She hadn't asked the haibane her name!

Fortunately the haibane was on the ball. "Kana," she said, finishing Kaori's sentence for her.

"Yes, Kana," she said. "She's a haibane. And she knows what's happening to you, and it's definitely not something bad!" she added enthusiastically. "You're going to be a haibane too!" That part was finally dawning on Kaori, and she'd have to admit she was excited. This girl was very lucky to get to be one!

The girl didn't share her excitement though. "What's a hai... a haibane?" she asked, her face blank.

"A haibane is a person with a pair of these," Kana replied, turning to the side so the girl could clearly see her wings. She gave them a flap, and the girl's jaw dropped. "Pretty cool, huh? That's what the pain on your back is. You're growing a pair of wings, because you're a haibane."

"I'm a haibane..." the girl began, and then she screwed up her eyes and jerked her hand away. "But... no! I'm not a haibane! I can't... I'm not! I don't want them! I don't want wings! I just want to go home!" She groaned, breaking down in tears again, and continued, "I want my mom! I want to know who I am, and I want to go home!"

Nobody answered her for some time. Kaori simply didn't know what to say. It was Kana who eventually swallowed and leaned closer to the bed.

"I understand what you mean. I know how you feel, because I said the same things when I arrived. I wondered why I had been abandoned here with these strange people, and I wished I could just go home... but we can't." Kana silently motioned for Kaori to take the girl's hand and she did so, feeling her squeeze her fingers very tightly. "We are here, and so are you... and I think you'll see, after tonight, that it's not so bad."

Kana then stood, backing away from the two of them. "There are a few things I need to get ready," she said. She then quietly mouthed "stay with her" to Kaori, who nodded.

As Kana headed for the kitchens to find various essentials - medical kit, brushes, bowls of water and something for the girl to bite - Kaori sat by the bed, speaking softly but at a loss for what to say. She'd never seen pain like this before, and certainly never felt it. She had few words of comfort, and she suddenly felt like an interloper in some bizarre ceremony. But she did her best and she never let go of her hand - and the girl never released her tight grip either.

They remained this way for several minutes, until the girl interrupted her while she was telling her about the roses she liked to plant in the garden.

"Kaori," she said anxiously, "I can feel them moving in my back! They're... AAGH!" She screamed and her grip tightened, and Kaori looked up at her back. The bulges were huge now, deep red with white blotches, and she watched in horror as a mound moved and the blotches shifted beneath the skin.

Oh god... Oh god... Oh god...

"KAAAANAAAA!" Kaori yelled, leaping to her feet and watching the lumps, unable to turn her eyes away from them. She watched, unable to blink or move, as both lumps moved simultaneously and the girl cried out again.

"KANA! SOMETHING'S HAPPEN..." Kaori started to yell again, until Kana rushed into the room mid-scream. She'd found the medicine kit (only a small comfort to Kaori, as she knew how empty it was) and strangely, was carrying the big wooden spoon too. Kana took one look at the scene and seemed to freeze for a moment, trapped in the glare of an unpleasant memory, until she shook her head and caught herself.

"Damnit, no time for ice..." she grumbled, running around to where Kaori stood and holding the handle of the spoon against the girl's trembling lips. "Here, bite on this, it'll help a little!"

The girl obeyed, lurching forward to clamp her teeth around the thick handle, biting so tightly that Kaori worried the wood would break or splinter in her mouth.

"Now what?" she asked Kana, her gaze darting between Kana's grim stare and the girl's spasms.

"Wait and see," the haibane replied. Her eyes were fixed on the girl's shoulderblades and her fists clenched, prepared for what was coming next.

She didn't have to wait long. Within a few seconds the lumps moved again, and this time the girl's skin broke. Kaori squirmed but held on tight to the girl's shaking hand as a small spurt of blood bubbled to the surface at the top of each lump, forming a small stream that ran down her side. The scream that accompanied it was the loudest yet and the girl clutched at the sheets with her free hand, her legs thrashing and her back contorting as the tears widened and fully-feathered wings started to emerge from her back, ripping through the skin like blunt knives. They were folded up, elbow first, and covered in dark blood which made them seem more like macabre torture devices than the mark of a blessed haibane.

Wings grew, blood flowed and skin tore for what - to Kaori - seemed like an eternity, filling the room with a rank scent and sapping light and sound from it. Then they stopped, and she became aware of the girl's wail. It was pain, confusion, loss and terror crying as one, and just as it died down she let out the loudest scream yet. Her wings boomed as they suddenly unfolded, quickly spreading themselves as wide as possible and sending flecks of blood arcing across the room.

The spoon fell from the girl's mouth as she screamed, and it fell off the bed and thumped against the rug. Seconds later the girl went limp and crashed to the mattress, and Kaori felt like she wanted to do the same. She dropped the girl's hand and put her own hands over her mouth as she slowly backed away from the bed, wondering what kind of nightmare she'd just witnessed. It was unbelievable... unthinkable... unreal! This kind of thing didn't happen to those cute, happy, haibane... what had this girl done to deserve something like that?

Kana was now kneeling by the girl's face. She was talking, but Kaori couldn't understand what she was saying - her words were garbled and oddly pitched, and seemed to be coming from a long way away. She looked up to smile at Kaori and a concerned frown hit her brow.

"Woah, are you okay?" Kana asked. "You don't look well."

"I'm ok..." Kaori said, even though she didn't feel like it. She stared at the girl who was lying completely still, and the worst possible outcome came to mind. "Is she... alive?"

"Of course she is," Kana said matter-of-factly, folding her arms. "Like I already said, she's just fainted. The wings came out with no problems." Kaori wondered what Kana's idea of a 'problem' was, as the haibane took another look at Kaori. "Are you sure you're ok? Your whole face has gone white." She turned away from Kaori, and focused on the girl. "I can handle things here for a while. Maybe you should go get a drink or something."

Kaori silently agreed, and rushed out of the room, trying to put what just happened out of her mind. She walked, somewhat unsteadily, to the kitchen and fell into a chair.

According to Kana, this happened to every haibane. Therefore, Kaori decided to think, it really wasn't a big deal. Nope. Kana looked pretty nonchalant about the whole thing. And Kana was a haibane, and would know. Seeing wings rip their way out through someone's back must be pretty ordinary to a haibane. That nameless, lost, amnesiac girl was going to be just fine, now that it's over...

Kaori clenched her fists, laying them on her legs just above the kneecap and staring at her knuckles. She took a deep breath and thought about that drink. Tea. Yes. Tea was very soothing.

She rose and slowly filled the kettle, taking care not to spill any water, and put it on the old stove to boil. She carefully lifted the teapot and put some tea in it, ready for the water. And then she got a teacup out of the cupboard, and put a spoonful of sugar in it.

Then she put the spoon back in the sugar bowl for the second spoonful, and suddenly jabbed so hard she sent it flying straight off the workbench. It fell to the floor and shattered, spreading sugar and porcelain over the stone floor. Kaori sank down with it and leant against the counter, putting her hand over her eyes and weeping into them for reasons she didn't fully understand.

* * *

>Kana came though to the kitchen several minutes later when she heard an endless whistling. She found Kaori sitting on the floor, crying into her hands as the kettle screamed above her. <p>"Kaori! What are doing letting..." she began, and then took a second look at the weeping woman. "Oh. Geez..." She hesitated for a moment, before running over to the kettle and taking it off the boil, and then moving over to Kaori to help her up.<p>

"Come on," Kana said, "if you need to sit down you'll be better off

in a chair." She put her arm around Kaori's back and lifted her up, guiding her to a chair by the table. Kaori practically fell into it and slumped forward onto the table.

"Sorry," Kana continued, "I guess I expected you wouldn't be so shocked by that. It's something that most haibane have got used to. I suppose it'd be a bit of a surprise for a human." Kana moved behind Kaori, who nodded mutely and sniffed. She could never have imagined that. She could still hear that poor girl's final scream in her head.

"That was the most horrible thing I've ever seen," Kaori said, slightly aware of a tinkling sound behind her. "She... they just... what could she have done to deserve that?"

The tinkling stopped, and Kana spoke again from behind her. "Deserve? I don't know... I don't think I've ever met a haibane who deserved it. It just happens." The tinkling restarted as Kana continued, "After all, we wouldn't be haibane if it didn't."

The sound ceased again, and a few seconds later Kana placed a cup of weak tea before Kaori. It had no milk and wasn't sweet enough for her tastes, but she politely sipped at it anyway.

"And it really happens to all haibane," she said in disbelief, and Kana nodded as she sat at the opposite side of the table. Kaori peered at Kana, trying to crane her neck to get a better look at her wings. "Did it happen to y..." she started to ask, until she realised it was a stupid question. "No, I mean... is it as bad as it looks? Is she really going to be okay?" Kaori couldn't imagine how someone could get over an experience like that.

"Yeah, it's as bad as it looks," Kana replied. "Probably worse. It's hard to describe... but you saw that final moment where the wings are out, and they suddenly flap open? That's the worst part. It's just feeling them... muscles you didn't have a minute ago, stretched to their limit, and new joints locked as far as they can go, and they all feel like they're on fire..." she trailed off for a moment. "It's like becoming a new you, and you're terrified for the old you." Kana took another look at Kaori, and a smile broke out on her face. "But don't worry about that. Like I said, that's the worst part. She'll be used to those wings in a few days. In a week or two, tonight won't be much more than a memory. Most haibane forget about their wing night." Kana's smile changed to a malicious grin, and she laughed a little. "In fact, if it makes you feel better - you should have seen Rakka and Hikari's faces after the twins were hatched. I think they'd forgotten what their own wing nights were really like, they were almost as pale as you are."

Kaori didn't know who Kana was referring to, but she couldn't help but laugh along. It made her feel a little better about her own state of mind.

* * *

>Kana soon left to go help the girl, saying something about washing her wings, but Kaori stayed in the kitchen as she wasn't quite ready to go back though yet. She spent most of her time just quietly sipping the tea and looking at her hand. A bruise was starting to show where the girl had been squeezing it. <p>She'd never done

anything like that before. And she realised, she'd never felt like this before either. All her life, it had been her asking others for help - their time, their money, their blessings. Then a girl had appeared from nowhere, who needed someone to hold her hand and tell her it's going to be okay... and although Kaori hadn't done anything special, for the first time ever she'd felt needed. And it felt good.<p>

She finished her tea and stood up, feeling greatly calmed, and crept back to her own bedroom. The first thing she noticed was the smell - the sweet scent of the cocoon fluid, the tang of blood, the stink of sweat. Considering the circumstances it was uncharitable to think this, but that girl was badly in need of a bath.

She was still unconcious, but didn't seem to be sleeping peacefully - her face was set in a grimace, and she occasionally squirmed in her sleep. Kana was sat by the bed, brushing the new wings with a wet brush, a very serious and focused expression on her face.

"How is she?" Kaori asked.

"No change," Kana replied. The girl moved and the wing in Kana's hand twitched, jerking out of her grip and making Kana glare. "Eugh..." she grumbled, "I like cleaning clocks better. They sit still. Reki made this look a lot easier than it really is."

Kaori took another glance at the girl, and then at Kana. "Is there anything I can do?"

Kana looked up, and shook her head. "You don't have to. I can handle it," she said defiantly and resumed her washing, but added "If you really want to though, you can start on the other wing. It'll be easier if the blood is shifted before it dries."

Kaori nodded and looked around, soon finding the spare bowl and brush. The bowl was already full of water, as if Kana had originally been expecting her to help. She pulled a chair up to the opposite side of the bed and took a moment to watch how Kana was doing this, before reaching out and carefully taking hold of the end of the girl's wing.

The feathers were soft and warm, but sticky and far from pleasant to hold, which gave Kaori a weird sense of disappointment. She'd always wanted to touch a haibane's wings (and hadn't exactly made a secret of it either) but these were not quite the circumstances she'd been looking for. To be blunt, the state of the wings was disgusting - they were soaked in blood and grease, and while Kaori had found earlier that the sight of blood didn't make her retch that didn't mean she was happy about getting it all over her hands.

She put aside her revulsion and started brushing, carefully drawing the brush down the wing, following the vanes. The blood started to clear as she did so. It did not happen quickly - after a dozen brushes only the feathers on the surface were clearing up - but she kept at it.

It was unexpectedly difficult though, and not too exciting. Soon even Kana was looking sapped. She hung her head and let her shoulders sag for a moment.

"I hate this..." she muttered. "It's a pain getting this blood to wash out. This is supposed to be Rakka and Hikari's job anyway."

"Are they another two haibane?"

"Yeah. Ever since Reki and Nemu left it's Rakka who looks after the new feathers and young feathers, and Hikari helps her. Except... well... sometimes it's Rakka helping Hikari, and sometimes they're both in charge and then nothing gets done at all," she seemed to say to herself with a weary tone in her voice, and then she resumed brushing.

"So why is it their job?" Kaori asked.

"They wanted it," Kana laughed. "I sure don't need it. My own job at the clock tower keeps me busy enough, and when I'm not there I want to get that rusty contraption at Old Home working. Anyway, nursing newborns isn't me... bodies may be a kind of machine but they're way too imprecise for me. I prefer clockwork."

Kaori nodded, though she didn't really understand Kana's position. She'd seen the inside of a clock face before, and all those spinning gears and clicking... thingys... had just mystified her. A human body was much simpler - everyone knew what muscles, hearts, arms and legs did.

'Although...' she thought to herself, as she held a wing in her hand, 'sometimes they can be completely unpredictable.'

"I've always wondered," Kaori said, "why Haibane get jobs. I mean... you work at the clock tower, right? Why?"

"The Renmei makes us, of course. Besides, if we want to be able to buy our own things, we need to be able to pay."

"But doesn't the Haibane Renmei pay for everything you need?"

That got a snigger from Kana.

"Ha-hah... no. You get a bit of credit when you're a newborn, but after that you need to work if you want to buy anything."

"But why the pocketbooks then?"

"The Renmei gets our wages, and they use it to pay for what we buy. We never see the actual money. We're actually forbidden to have any."

Kaori paused in her brushing. That didn't really sound very fair.

"But why do they make it so complex?" she asked. "If they just gave you the money..."

"We'd be able to buy whatever we want." Kana said, finishing Kaori's sentence. "They don't want that." Kaori just looked at Kana as she said, somewhat bitterly, "A few weeks ago, I wanted to take a look at the clock face in the tower back at Old Home, make sure it hadn't seized with rust, but there were no footholds. So I tried to buy some

ropes and climbing equipment... but the man in the shop wouldn't sell me it, and a few days later I got called in to the temple because the Communicator thought I'd wanted to climb the wall." Kana snorted. "Come on. I'm not that dumb - that thing's lethal. In the end, they got the ropes for us and then came and watched me every moment I was using them, to make sure I gave them all back afterwards."

The conversation moved on from there. Kaori pressed Kana on many subjects, and heard a lot, most of it much more negative than she expected. It started to become clear to her that Haibane led much more difficult lives than she'd expected. She'd never known that they were only allowed second hand goods, or that they could only take certain jobs. Over time as she looked at this strange girl, she started to feel sorry for her. What kind of life had she been born into?

But she didn't voice this, just kept it to herself and continued washing the wings. The underside was much more difficult to wash - obviously they couldn't lay the girl on her back, so Kaori and Kana had to crane their necks around and try to wash upside down. It was while they were doing this that they heard a whimper from the girl, and both sat up to see her eyes open a little.

"Hey..." Kaori said. "Are you awake?"

"Mhmmph," the girl replied. "I feel hot... and heavy..." Panic started to rise in her voice. "My eyes are stinging... I can't see!"

"That's okay!" Kana said. "Don't worry about that, that's..." she began, and then paused, tapping her finger against her cheek as she thought. "Okay, I can't remember why that is. But don't worry about it. It'll be gone before you know it."

"Okay..." the girl said faintly. "I can feel you doing something... doing something with _them._"

"We're just washing your feathers." Kana replied. "If we don't they'll get stained."

"Your wings came out without any problems," Kaori said, parroting what Kana had told her earlier. "Once they're washed, they'll be very nice. I always felt jealous of Haibane who had such pretty wings and halos," she added, trying to cheer the girl up.

"Oh..." the girl replied, cracking a very slight smile. "How do I get a halo?"

Kaori was about to answer when she realised she didn't know, and she froze in horror when the worst case scenario presented itself. Surely the halo didn't just break it's way out of the top of the skull, like the wings did from the back? That would be awful!

Her fears were relieved when Kana replied. "The other haibane will make you one, we'll give it to you tomorrow."

"Oh," the girl said quietly. "Will the other haibane be able to tell me who I am, or what my name is?"

Kana shook her head. "No... nobody will know that." The girl looked

disappointed, and Kana quickly added, "but we can give you a new name. No haibane remember who they were or what their names were before they came here, but every haibane has a dream while they're in the cocoon. We name them after the dreams they had... like, for example, I dreamt I swimming like a fish, so I'm called Kana as in River Fish."

Kaori started, and sat up. "She had a dream too! She told me about it!" After asking the girl's permission, Kaori told Kana about the dream the girl had had in her cocoon, about her floating in water all alone, unable to stand up, as the days passed by around her.

At the end of the description of the dream, Kana seemed to fall into thought, and Kaori said "can you name her, then?"

"I could," Kana replied, "but I'm not sure if I should. The first person to find a new feather's cocoon is supposed to name them... which would be you, Kaori. But I'm not sure if humans are supposed to name haibane." She seemed to think about it for a little longer, and broke out into a grin. "Oh, the heck with it. If anyone says you shouldn't have, I'll just say I chose the name."

"You want me to pick the name?" Kaori said, slightly shocked. "But..."

She wanted to protest, but Kana was looking at her expectantly, and the girl was staring at her with a desperate look on her face. She realised that she hadn't really done anything for this girl that she hadn't screwed up in in some way or needed help with. A name... she could really do something for her if she thought up a good one.

"Okay," she said, slightly rattled. "Let me think for a moment." She started to think of the haibane names she'd heard - Kana, Hikari, Rakka, Reki and Nemu. Well... it looked like she could name her after an object, like Kana, Hikari and Reki were. But the only object in the girl's dream was the sea, and Umi seemed like too ordinary a name for a haibane. But on the other hand, Rakka and Nemu were named after actions. Falling and sleeping. So maybe...

"What about Ukimi, for floating?" she said carefully, hoping it would be good enough, and was relieved when a satisfied smile appeared on Kana's face.

"Sounds good to me," Kana said. "How do you like that, Ukimi?"

Kaori looked down at the girl, and was a little surprised to see a faint smile on her face.

"I think I like it," Ukimi said, and closed her eyes. "Thank you, Kaori."

* * *

>The night wore on, with the woman and the haibane brushing endlessly in an attempt to get the wings presentable. Then, once they were sure Ukimi was clean and comfortable, Kana said she was going get some help from Old Home or the Renmei and asked Kaori to watch her while she was away. <p>Kaori sat at her dresser and rested her head in her hands, keeping an eye on the sleeping haibane. She didn't know how

long she remained there for, but the next thing she knew she was lifting her head off the dresser and trying to shake the sleep out of her eyes.<p>

She looked up, trying to remember why she had been sleeping with her head on the dresser, and noticed the sunlight flickering around the edges of the drapes. It had to be midday at least - she'd chosen this room because it didn't catch the sun in the morning.

Her bedclothes were stripped, but there was an odd stench of blood in the room, and it took her a moment to remember why.

"Ukimi!" she exclaimed. There was no sign of the young haibane anywhere, and no Kana either. She looked around for a moment, completely bewildered, and then realised she could hear people walking around.

She ran out of the room and headed for the main hall, only to encounter a pair of haibane coming down the stairs. One was a serious-looking boy, wearing jeans and a hooded red sweatshirt, while the other was a girl whose black hair was tied into a pair of straight pigtails. They were carrying bulky cloth sacks, which were dripping slightly.

"I'm just saying," the girl complained, "don't you think it's weird for a haibane to hatch in a human's house? It's never happ..." She stopped suddenly when she saw Kaori. "Oh. Hi."

"Who are you two?" Kaori asked, a little angry at having some uninvited guests, even if they were haibane.

"We're haibane from the Abandoned Factory," the boy replied. "Hyouko and Midori. The Communicator asked us to come and dispose of the cocoon."

Kaori was just about to ask about Ukimi when the girl added, "he's waiting for you upstairs, in the cocoon room."

"Waiting?" Kaori asked, her train of thought disturbed. "Who's waiting?"

"The Communicator from the Haibane Renmei," Hyouko replied, slightly exasperated. "He's been wanting to talk to you." Hyouko stayed pretty neutral while he said this, but Kaori caught Midori grinning.

A grin that seemed to say "you're in trouble now."

* * *

>Her father's study had been cleaned up - the cocoon was gone, the ruined carpet had been taken up and the floorboards and walls had been washed until any remnants of the cocoon fluid were gone. But the haibane had not been able to remove her own perceptions of this room, and Kaori felt the oppressive gloom of one of her father's lectures settle on her as she entered the room. <p>Except the man standing by the writing desk was not her father, but an old man dressed in long green and white hooded robes. His face was covered in a spoon-shaped mask, such that Kaori could not see his eyes, nose or mouth, and his cheeks were adorned with tattooed red streaks. Circular ornaments hung from threads attached to the hem of his hood, he seemed to have

a pair of prosthetic wooden haibane wings on his back, and he leant on a wooden cane with an ornamental head, a round ball with a pair of wings attached.<p>

She just looked at him quite awkwardly for a moment and then he spoke.

"You are Kaori, hieress of the Leyton fortune and current owner of this house, are you not?" His voice was deep and ancient, practically the definition of authority.

She nodded nervously, and said "Uh, yes..." and quickly followed it with, "I'm sorry, but am I allowed to talk to you?" She'd heard stories.

"Yes, you may," the Communicator replied. "It is extremely unusual for a cocoon to appear outside of a haibane nest," he continued, "and it is clear that if you had not been here, haibane Ukimi's hatching would have been far more troubling and painful, and may have caused her serious harm. The Haibane Renmei thanks you for your generosity and diligence in this matter."

Kaori stared and blinked, wondering if Kana had exaggerated her role in the night's events. Eventually she just managed to say, "You're welcome. It was my pleasure. She's a good girl."

The Communicator nodded slightly, and reached inside his robe, drawing out a heavy cloth bag. "Ukimi has been taken to Old Home to live as a member of that nest." For some reason Kaori felt her spirits drop at that, though what else had she been expecting? "I asked the haibane of the Abandoned Factory to clean this room and dispose of the cocoon, and this is a token of the gratitude of the Haibane Renmei."

He set the bag down on the desk and it made many small chink sounds - it was clearly stuffed with coins.

"This should be enough to repair any damage Ukimi's ordeal has done to your belongings. However, we must ask that you keep this event a secret. It is extremely rare for a cocoon to appear outside a nest, but some of your fellow townspeople would react poorly to the concept regardless of how unlikely it is." He kept his hand on the top of the bag as he spoke, and even though he was masked Kaori got the feeling he was looking directly at her. "I am sure you understand."

She glanced at the purse, and nodded. "Yes."

"Good. Now, I have things I must attend to."

He headed for the door and swept straight past Kaori, moving surprisingly quickly for such an old man. She stared dumbly at the otherwise empty room for a split second, then turned to watch him. That was it? She still had more she wanted to know!

"Wait!" she yelled, and he stopped in the doorway. "Wait! There's something I need to ask you!"

He turned and looked down at her. "The concerns of the townspeople are not the concerns of the Haibane Renmei, save where they directly involve the haibane. You should choose your question carefully."

"It does involve the haibane!" Kaori said, leaning against the writing desk. "It's just... since I was born, I've been told that the haibane are here to bless the town, and the townspeople... they're here to give us good fortune." She took her keyring out of her pocket, and held the happy little haibane in her hand. "But last night I found out about several things. They're born in fear, pain and confusion... they live difficult lives, with less comforts and more restrictions than us... and then they just disappear." She looked away from the Communicator. "How can they bring us good fortune when they have none? I really need that..."

She was interrupted by an angry grunt from the Communicator, and looked up to see his posture had changed slightly - more upright and imposing.

"What makes you believe that haibane are here to help you?" he asked, an angry tone to his voice. "It is amazing that you could witness the pain that a haibane must bear, but come away concerned only for their ability to bless you." He turned away, hanging his head. "When I heard it was you who had found the new feather, I had hoped you might have grown since that time. Evidently it was too much to expect."

"What?" That was unfair! She'd worked hard for that girl and was really worried for her, but she was with other haibane now and her own life had to go on after this. Was some good luck too much to hope for? And waitaminute... what did he mean...

"That time? What time?"

The Communicator turned back to her and faced her down. "You were already known to the Haibane Renmei before this. Over a year ago you found a haibane in the second hand store. You treated her like your toy, playing with her halo and almost touching her wings, until she ran out the store."

Kaori stared at him, and couldn't help but nod. She had met the grumpy haibane there, of course...

"That haibane was in poor health at the time. She was depressed for many reasons, despondent and miserable, and anxious about her wings. Your actions were negligible in contrast, but enough to cause her to break down." Kaori listened, horrified, as the communicator continued. "Over the next few hours she wandered into the Western Woods and endangered her own life not once but twice, as a consequence of your insensitivity."

Kaori gasped and dropped the keyring. It fell to the floor and made a 'thok!' sound as the haibane's head struck the floorboards.

"Fortunately," the Communicator continued, "she did not do herself any lasting harm, and we decided to let the matter of your involvement in her actions drop. If she had seriously hurt herself, the consequences could have been much more severe."

"But..." Kaori protested, "I didn't mean to! I didn't want to hurt her or anything!"

"You saw a person and treated her like an object," the Communicator retorted. "It is a small sin, but also the root of the very worst sins." He turned away, to leave the room. "And it is less than haibane or humans deserve."

* * *

>The moon was high in the sky, just beginning its descent back to the horizon. Rakka sat next to Kaori on a low garden wall, listening intently to Kaori's story. <p>"After that, he just left, leaving me alone in that room. When I went downstairs the two factory haibane were gone too. I've had a lot of time to think about what he said since then. And that's why I wanted to apologize."<p>

Rakka sat up, slightly angry at the Communicator's actions. Partly because he had spoken openly about Rakka's trial without her knowledge, and partly because he had clearly not given Kaori the whole story.

"But in a way," Rakka eventually said. "I should be thanking you. The ordeal I went through that night brought an end to my illness and my depression. I might have remained like that for much longer if you had not treated me like that... and my recovery might have come too late for other things..." she said, thinking of Reki. She could never have helped Reki if she had still been sin-bound herself.

That seemed to cheer Kaori slightly, but not much. "That's good to know... but I don't think it changes his point." At that she fell silent again. She didn't want to admit to Rakka where her thoughts had led her over the last month - re-examining her life, she'd found she'd treated every relationship with the same kind of selfishness and insensitivity that she'd exhibited in the second hand store. She hadn't left her fiancée, Kenji, because of his critical nature - he'd drifted away from her, and grown to despise her because of how she took him and others utterly for granted. Her father's dislike of her had been part of her own imagination - unlike others around her, he had been the only one who would not allow her to do whatever she liked, who expected her to act responsibly in all things, a trait she had never even attempted to learn. And then she'd looked at her old circle of friends, and realized that they had never really been more than acquaintances - had one of them met with serious problems, her reaction would probably have been similar to how they reacted when she hit her own financial woes - quiet ostracism.

Then she'd been shown the real consequences of her attitudes, and had realised something important - that she was not the innocent victim of circumstances she imagined she was. She'd invited every piece of bad luck she'd experienced, either by aggravating someone through her selfishness or giving them no reason to care whether she lived or died.

She leaned forward and looked at Rakka. "You've been taking good care of Ukimi," she said, changing the subject, and Rakka blushed a little. "I was surprised when she and Kana visited me a few days later. She looked so much happier and secure than when she left my house, and you got her hair out of her eyes," she said with a smile, motioning to the side of her head where Ukimi often wore small barrettes in her hair. "She often visits me now... comes to talk, and to help take care of my garden. She talks about you a lot when she visits me," she added, getting a surprised Oh from Rakka.

"Really?" Rakka felt a little flattered. "She talks about you as well. To tell you the truth I was looking forward to meeting you myself, but whenever I came into town with Ukimi you weren't home."

Kaori cringed at this. "Actually," she said, quite embarrassed, "I was home. Just hiding." Rakka stared at her, and Kaori explained - "I wasn't ready to talk to you yet. That's why I never visited Ukimi at Old Home, either. I came one day, but I saw you talking with her outside and I couldn't come any closer..."

"There wasn't any need for that," Rakka said, slightly upset that she'd unwittingly driven a wedge between Ukimi and Kaori. "You can come visit her at Old Home any time you like."

"Really? But..."

"We'd be happy to have you," Rakka said with a smile. "A friend of any haibane is a friend of all haibane, no matter what happened in the past. And since you're friends with three haibane now... well, I don't think even the Renmei could keep you out."

* * *

>Kaori promised to visit soon, and the two eventually went their separate ways, Rakka beginning the long dark walk back to Old Home. She was relieved when she reached the edge of the town and saw someone on a scooter approaching - it was Kana, who scolded Rakka for staying out so long. It was past 1AM, and apparently Hikari was getting extremely anxious. <p>Rakka hitched a ride on the back of the scooter and Kana her drove her back to the nest. After apologizing profusely to Hikari for worrying her she headed to bed.<p>

Fortunately the first day of the new year was a day of rest for haibane, so Rakka was able to rise later than usual and make up for the late bedtime. The day passed quietly and without incident, and on the next day Rakka reported for work at the temple earlier than usual.

She had been travelling beneath the wall to gather kohaku for more than a year and was more trusted by the Renmei now. Once bells had been placed on her wings and wrists she was able to move freely around the temple - she even had her own keys for the doors between the gardens and the restricted areas. It was a responsibility that she was always careful not to abuse, and she had never intruded on areas where she did not need to be.

Her responsibilities were not limited to her work beneath the wall these days though. Every day, after completing her cleaning, she reported to the Communicator. On most days this was merely a formality, but every so often he had a task for her. A word to pass on, a suggestion to be made... a message for when a haibane may not listen to the Renmei, but might listen to another haibane. Some months after helping Reki achieve her day of flight, Rakka realized she'd become the Communicator's mouth, eyes and ears in Old Home.

It was a little aggravating at times - often she would be asked to broach a subject that was difficult to talk about, or maybe none of

her business. But it was effective. Usually what she was asked to do didn't magically fix the problem, but it often was a start, and that was a good thing. So Rakka returned day after day, to a gazebo in the garden where the Communicator could often be found sitting at a round table in silent meditation.

When she found him today however, he was in a different kind of contemplation. A map of the town was spread out over the table, and he was hunched over it. In the absence of facial cues Rakka had learned to read the Communicator's body language quite well, and right now he seemed quite worried.

There was also something else sitting on a chair nearby, and Rakka jumped when she saw it. She stared at it for a moment, wondering why it was here, until the Communicator noticed she was there.

"Ah, haibane Rakka." He looked up from his map. "I trust all is well at Old Home?"

"Yes," she replied. The rules about not speaking in the temple had been relaxed for Rakka, another sign of the additional trust and responsibility she carried, but she still wore the bells in case she needed to address a Toga. She wondered if she should ask about the thing sitting in the opposite chair, but decided she'd really rather not. Yet she couldn't keep her eyes away from it.

"Is there a problem?" the Communicator asked, and Rakka panicked slightly.

"N-no," she replied, wondering what this was all about. There was a strange change in the Communicator's posture and tone that she didn't recognize, and Rakka wondered if this was mirth.

"Are you sure?" he asked again, and Rakka sagged.

"There is a little doll that looks like me sitting in that chair," she protested, wondering if he - of all people - was playing a practical joke on her.

He leaned around the table, and said with mock surprise, "You are right. There is a small doll sitting there. We confiscated her from a stall owner who was giving them away as prizes in a game." He paused and looked directly at her, and the tone of his voice became more severe. "He came here to complain, because apparently you hit him in the back of the head with... a beanbag?" Even though it was hidden behind his mask, Rakka could have sworn she heard the Communicator's eyebrow rising.

She sighed, intensely embarrassed about the whole situation, and nodded. "Yes. I did."

The Communicator slowly rose out of his chair and walked around the table to pick up the doll.

"The stall owner will be punished by the merchant's association in town, who agree that his prizes were in poor taste. As for you..." The Communicator turned and offered the doll to Rakka. "I think you should keep this, as a reminder not to attack the people of Glie, regardless of how you may be provoked." He fixed her with a different kind of look, which Rakka quickly identified as concern. "You have

taken on many extra responsibilities over the past year, and risen to them admirably, but at the expense of some of your temperament and patience. Please, do not allow yourself to be overworked."

"I won't," Rakka said. She took the doll from him and immediately hid it in the inside pocket of her coat. "And I'm sorry about what I did. I won't do it again."

"Good."

The Communicator returned to his chair, and returned his attention to the map for a moment. "There is something more important that we need to discuss. I have a task for you."

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Rakka left the Communicator ten minutes later, a little confused about his request but prepared to carry it out.

As she walked though the garden she cast a glance back over her shoulder. He was absorbed in his map once again, a single figure sitting at the gazebo in perfect silence.

When Rakka had first arrived she had been terrified of him. She still remembered her first visit to this temple - the silence in here was always stifling. The Toga worked silently, as if creating any noise whatsoever was an affront to their order, and there is something naturally noisy about a pair of haibane girls which is hard to suppress. But out of the silence would come a voice that boomed in the stillness, giving orders and advice, showing kindness but brooking no dissent. Whether they liked or disliked him, there were few haibane who did not respect and fear the Communicator.

But Rakka had seen there was more to him than that over the past year. She'd realized that he was alone in all of Glie - neither a haibane, nor a Toga, nor a townspeople. He was wise and steadfast, but as Rakka looked back at him she wondered how many years he had spent sitting alone in this temple, with no company and nothing to do but dedicate his life to helping the haibane in ways they might never appreciate or even notice... and often without a word of thanks. She'd been looking for a way to show her appreciation for a while now but...

'Well,' she thought to herself. 'Who cares if the festival is over?'

A few minutes later, after Rakka had left the temple, a Toga approached the Communicator and handed him a pair of wing bells. A red bell nut had been tied to one of them.

He held it between his thumb and forefingers. "Foolish," he said to himself. "I require no gifts. That there are so many blessed haibane in Glie is reward enough."

Then he closed his fist around the nut and held it tightly.

End
file.